

WASHINGTON POST

1 March 1987

Digging Out

HOWARD BAKER and Frank Carlucci as the president's two principal White House assistants will be a vast improvement over Donald Regan and John Poindexter. You won't get an argument from practically anyone on that. Far from it, there is—oddly, given the fact that it has been only a matter of days since Disaster seemed to prevail—something akin to euphoria in the air. People who only hours before were sunk in bleakest fugues suddenly all seemed to be singing "Ding, dong, the witch is dead!" More than Howard Baker's popularity or Donald Regan's lack of it was responsible. Another element was surely the perception that people had been put in charge who know how to govern and care about governing, people who actually respect both the process and those who have chosen to involve themselves in it.

It is worth noting that we go through these things periodically in Washington, a kind of cathartic experience in which it is finally agreed by some stubborn president or other that it would be well for the White House to recognize that the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue exists and to put some people in place who not only have civil relations with the rest of the city, but also partake in the ancestral memory of how things get done here. We thought Mr. Carlucci fit this bill nicely when he was appointed, and we think the same of Sen. Baker. Mr. Baker is an honest, personable and extremely intelligent man. He is a man who likes other people and who likes governing, and he is a grown-up. As Senate Republican leader in President Reagan's earlier days, Mr. Baker rightly challenged him on fiscal policy. He will be a loyal assistant. But he is no yes man, so he will also be a valuable assistant.

But Howard Baker is not going to be president. It is Ronald Reagan who has the comeback to make. There has been a kind of drum roll for this comeback. You get the sense that the president is about to step back on stage in some new role, that he has been sustained and even invigorated by the closing of Republican ranks, the dramatic consultations, the suspense, the desperate calls upon him to reappear and demonstrate that he is not the somnambulant, unfocused figure who emerges from the pages of the Tower Commission Report. We suspect that he is about to do it. And we hope that he is, that the administration will not be immobilized into a final two years of drift by the exposure of the terrible Iran-contra folly.

But, importantly, more than cosmetic changes are required if the comeback is to have meaning. People need to know that Mr. Reagan has understood what went so wrong in his national security advisers' activities and that he has faced his own part in it. In the coming week the president will indicate, by his actions and in his appearances, whether he has done so. One other thing: the senators who are warning Mr. Reagan that he should withdraw his nomination of Robert Gates to be director of the CIA are right. Mr. Gates has undoubted qualities as an analyst and manager, but he has emerged from both his hearings and the Tower Commission Report as just not big enough or strong enough for the job. The president will be setting about to restore confidence in himself and his government after a very bad period. He will need to show he understands what went wrong and that he means things to be different now. Howard Baker is a right signal to send on that account. Robert Gates is no villain, but he is not a right signal or the right man either.